HARISCHANDRA

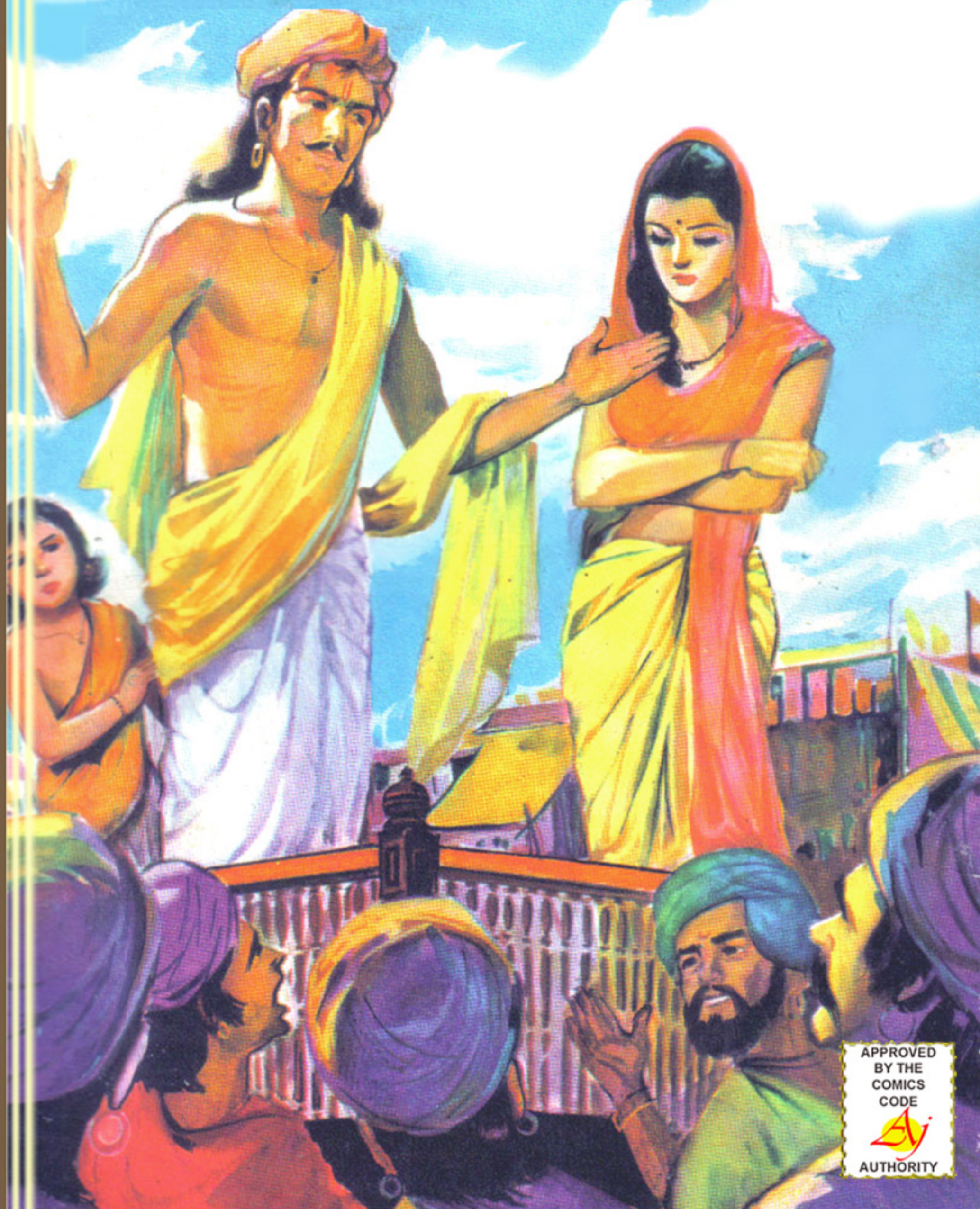
AMAR CHITRA KATHA

No. 17

HARISCHANDRA

THE STORY OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL KING WHOSE NAME IS SYNONYMOUS WITH TRUTH

AMAR CHITRA KATHA



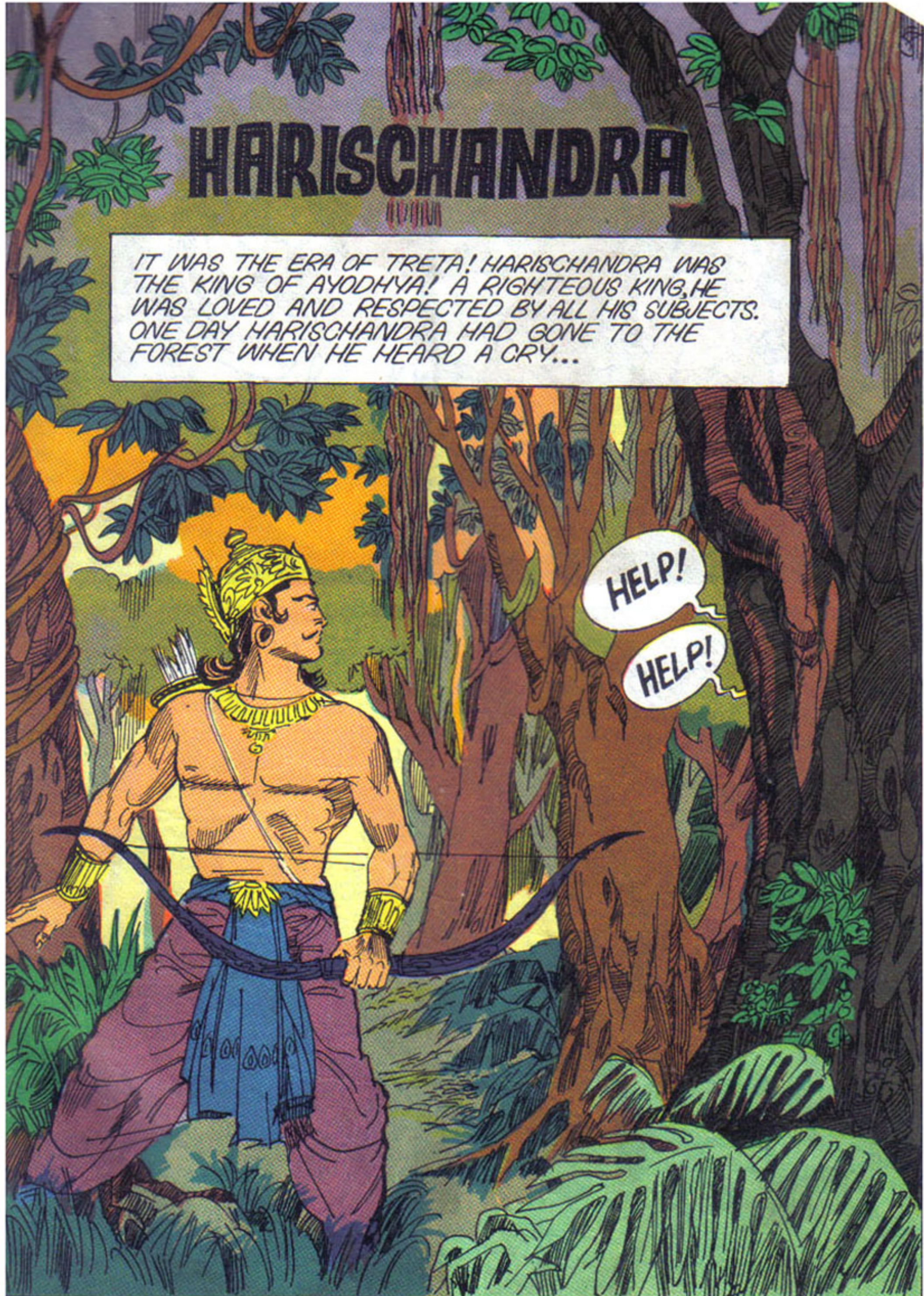
India is a land of countless legends and stories. A few of them have survived the onslaught of time and remained alive over the centuries. One such story is that of Harischandra, the king whose honesty was unmatched.

The story as it has come down to us has many variations, from the original narration in the Markandeya Purana. The folk-singers, the poets and the dramatists, have all handled the story and have all added to it—an incident here, a character there—for greater effects. It is worth mentioning that Gandhiji whose experiments with truth are justly famous, was greatly inspired by a dramatic representation of this story, which he had seen in his boyhood.

The story of a king, who, pitted against forces immensely more powerful than himself faces them with an unflinching faith in integrity, is not only dramatic but ennobling. That is the secret of its everlasting appeal.

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HARISCHANDRA
IT WAS THE ERA OF TRETA! HARISCHANDRA WAS THE KING OF AYODHYA! A RIGHTEOUS KING, HE WAS LOVED AND RESPECTED BY ALL HIS SUBJECTS. ONE DAY HARISCHANDRA HAD GONE TO THE FOREST WHEN HE HEARD A CRY...
HELP!
HELP!

THINKING IT WAS A WOMAN IN DISTRESS, HARISCHANDRA RUSHED TOWARDS THE SOUND. SOON HE CAME UPON A CLEARING IN THE WOOD.





I WAS ABOUT TO SUCCEED! YOU HAVE SPOILED EVERYTHING BY COMING HERE! MY CURSE WILL DESTROY YOUR KINGDOM!

IN VAIN DID HARISCHANDRA PLEAD WITH THE SAGE.





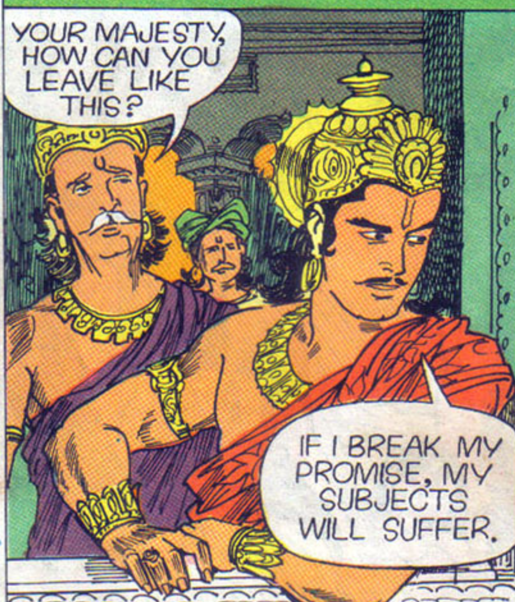
A FEW DAYS LATER, HARISCHANDRA WAS SEATED ON HIS THRONE. SUDDENLY A LOUD VOICE BROKE THE SILENCE.

HARISCHANDRA!





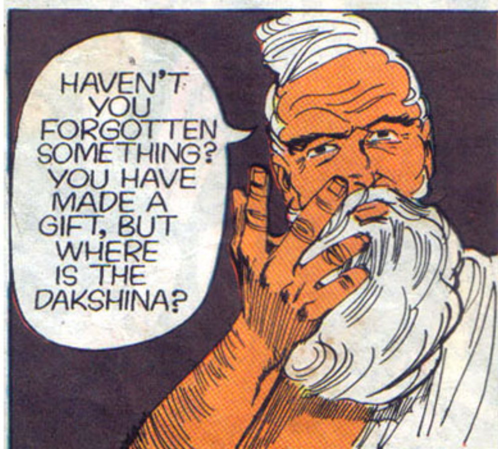




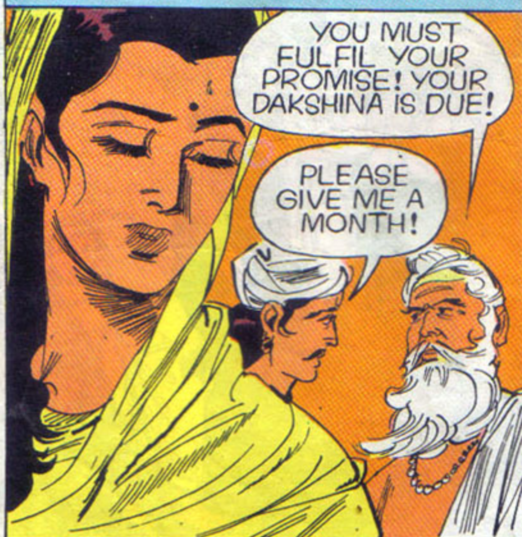
THE WHOLE CITY CAME TO THE ROAD TO WATCH THE THREE LONELY PEOPLE, HARISCHANDRA, QUEEN SAIVYA AND PRINCE ROHITASWA, GOING AWAY. THEY ALL WEPT, FOR THEY LOVED THEIR KING, THEIR QUEEN AND THE YOUNG PRINCE.

AFTER WALKING A FEW MILES, HARISCHANDRA HEARD SOMEONE CALL HIM FROM BEHIND. HE TURNED ROUND TO FIND THE SAGE VISHWAMITRA COMING TOWARDS THEM.

WAIT!



WITH EVERY GIFT GIVEN, ONE HAD TO GIVE A DAKSHINA– AN HONORARIUM! HARISCHANDRA HAD GIVEN AWAY EVERYTHING! HE HAD NOTHING LEFT FOR DAKSHINA!



THE KING AND THE QUEEN AND THE YOUNG PRINCE ROHITASWA ROAMED FROM LAND TO LAND. IT WAS A LONG JOURNEY, THROUGH FORESTS, THROUGH DESERTS.

ONE MONTH IS NEARLY OVER! I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET ANY WORK. HOW SHALL I PAY THE SAGE?

HOW LONG SHALL WE ROAM LIKE THIS? THE CHILD IS TIRED.

FATHER! WHY DIDN'T YOU BRING OUR CHARIOT?

AT LAST THEY REACHED THE TEMPLE CITY OF VARANASI.

I HOPE I SHALL GET SOME WORK HERE!

THE TEMPLES OF VARANASI STOOD MAJESTICALLY ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER GANGA. THE TIRED KING AND HIS FAMILY WENT UP TO A TEMPLE.

DO YOU THINK WE CAN FIND SHELTER HERE?

LET US GO AND MEET THE HIGH PRIEST!






ONE DAY AS THE TRIO WALKED THROUGH THE CROWDED STREET, HARISCHANDRA HEARD A A FAMILIAR VOICE.
HARISCHANDRA!


ONE MONTH IS OVER TODAY!
I KNOW, BUT...


...THE DAY IS NOT YET OVER! PLEASE WAIT TILL NIGHTFALL.


IN A FEW HOURS THE SUN WILL SET! HOW SHALL I PAY THE DAKSHINA?

ROHITASWA, THE YOUNG PRINCE, WAS A BRAVE BOY! HE HAD BORNE THE HARDSHIPS OF HIS PARENTS' EXILE WITH A SMILING FACE. BUT HIS YOUNG BODY COULD NOT BEAR THE STRAIN FOR LONG.

MOTHER! I AM VERY HUNGRY! PLEASE GIVE ME SOME FOOD!

YES, DEAR! YOUR FATHER HAS GONE TO LOOK FOR WORK! HE WILL BRING SOME FOOD!





THE MARKETPLACE.

WHO WILL BUY ME? I CAN DO ANY WORK!

LOOK AT THAT FRAIL MAN! WHAT WORK CAN HE DO?

THE DESPERATE KING BESOUGHT MAN AFTER MAN.

WILL YOU BUY ME?

NO. YOU LOOK WEAK!

I MUST SELL MYSELF! I MUST SELL MYSELF!

STANDING UNDER THE MIDDAY SUN, HARISCHANDRA WAS CONSCIOUS OF ONLY THOSE WORDS BEATING IN HIS HEAD.

PLEASE BUY ME!

NOBODY WILL BUY YOU! BUT SOMEONE MAY BUY YOUR WIFE FOR HOUSEWORK!

QUEEN SAIVYA HAD HEARD WHAT THE PASSER-BY HAD SAID. SHE APPROACHED HER HUSBAND.

NO ONE WILL BUY YOU! BUT YOU HAVE SOMETHING ELSE FOR SALE.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

I HAVE GIVEN YOU A SON! MY LIFE IS FULFILLED! SELL ME AND PAY YOUR DEBT!

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE SAYING? SELL MY OWN WIFE?

TRUTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HUMAN BEINGS! YOU MUST UPHOLD TRUTH! DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE SAGE SAID?

YES, I REMEMBER!

WITH A HEAVY HEART HARISCHANDRA WENT TO THE MARKET PLACE. THEY CLIMBED THE PLATFORM ERECTED FOR AUCTIONS. SOON A CROWD GATHERED.

WHO WILL BUY A WOMAN FOR HOUSE-HOLD WORK? MY WIFE IS FOR SALE!



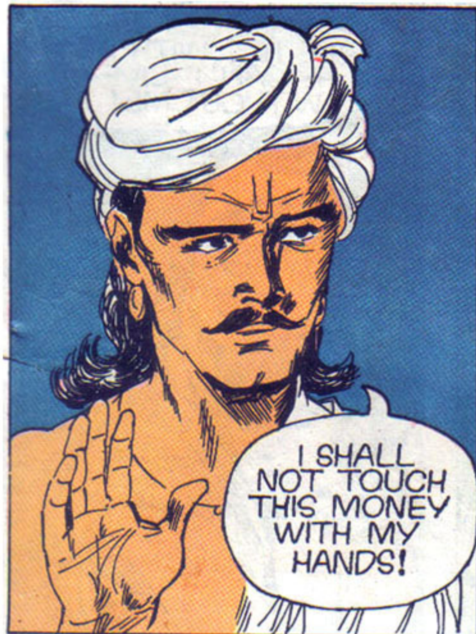


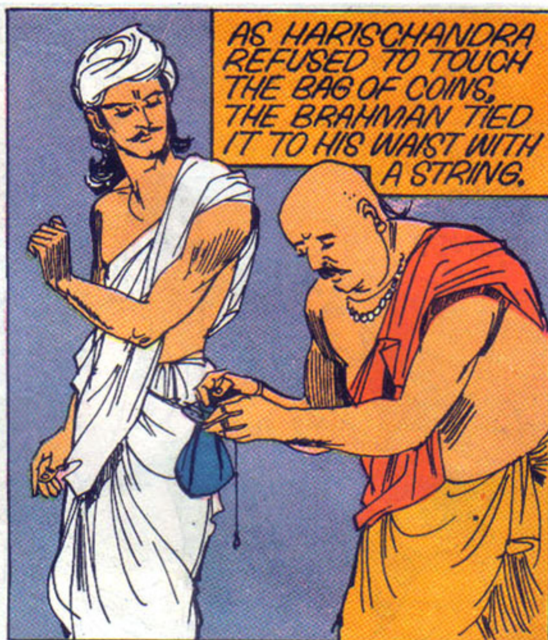

A BRAHMAN OFFERED TO BUY THE QUEEN.
I WILL TAKE HER!


WHAT WORK WILL YOU GIVE HER?
SHE WILL BE MY WIFE'S SERVANT. WHAT IS HER PRICE?


HOW CAN A MAN FIX THE PRICE OF HIS WIFE, THE MOTHER OF HIS SON?


THE BRAHMAN WAS DELIGHTED. HE COULD OFFER ANY PRICE HE LIKED.
THEN TAKE THESE FIVE HUNDRED GOLD COINS AND GIVE UP ALL CLAIM ON HER!



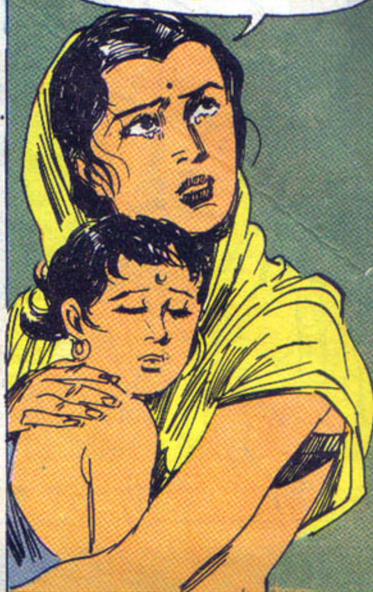


THE YOUNG PRINCE WAS BEWILDERED TO SEE HIS MOTHER GOING AWAY WITH THE OLD BRAHMAN! HE STARTED RUNNING AFTER HER, CRYING LOUDLY.

MOTHER! MOTHER!

HEARING HER SON'S CRY, THE QUEEN'S HEART WAS FILLED WITH PAIN! SHE COULD NOT GO FARTHER!



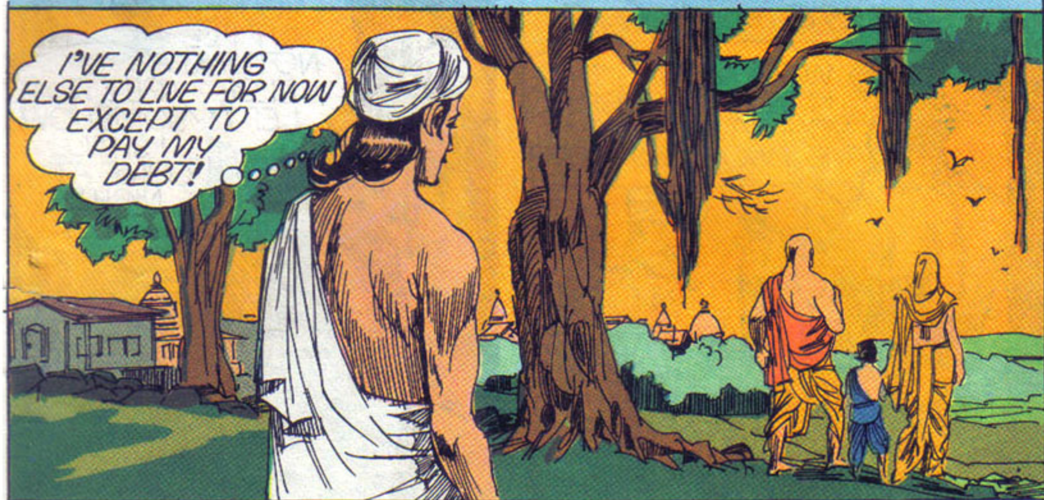


THE BRAHMAN WAS GLAD HE COULD BUY THE CHILD ALSO. HE OFFERED SOME MORE MONEY AS THE PRICE OF YOUNG ROHITASWA.

HERE'S ANOTHER TWO-FIFTY! I SHALL BUY THE BOY AS WELL!

MY SON TOO!

HARISCHANDRA STOOD HELPLESSLY WATCHING HIS WIFE AND SON BEING TAKEN AWAY BY THE MAN WHO HAD BOUGHT THEM.







HARISCHANDRA UNTIED THE PURSE FROM HIS BELT AND GAVE IT TO THE SAGE.

WHAT IS THIS? THIS IS NOT ENOUGH! YOU HAVE TO PAY ME TWO-FIFTY MORE!

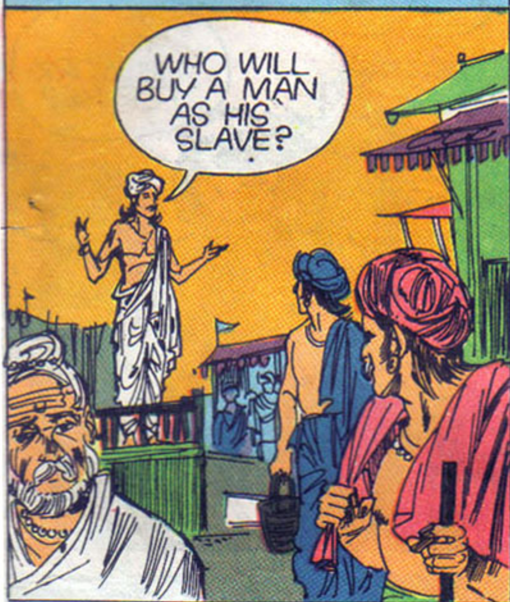
NOT ENOUGH? BUT I'VE NOTHING ELSE LEFT!

GET IT SOMEHOW. I SHALL COME AT NIGHT-FALL!

WITH A PAINFUL HEART HARISCHANDRA SAT DOWN ON THE STEPS BESIDE THE RIVER. THE DAY WAS WANING. HE KNEW NO WAY OF RAISING MORE MONEY FOR VISHWAMITRA.

I MUST TRY ONCE MORE!

RETURNING TO THE MARKET-PLACE, HARISCHANDRA STOOD ON THE PLATFORM AGAIN—THIS TIME A LONELY FIGURE.





NO ONE WOULD BUY THE LEAN MAN. A CHANDALA WHO WAS THE KEEPER OF THE CREMATION GROUND WAS WATCHING THE AUCTION.

I AM STRONG! IT'S ONLY THAT I'VE NOT EATEN FOR A FEW DAYS! WHO WILL BUY ME?

I SHALL BUY YOU, IF YOU WISH TO BE BOUGHT!

A SKULL AND A STICK IN HIS HANDS! HE IS A CHANDALA!
WILL YOU WORK FOR ME?






AFTER PAYING VISHWAMITRA HIS DAKSHINA, HARISCHANDRA WALKED WITH HIS NEW MASTER TO THE PLACE OF WORK.
WHAT WORK DO I HAVE TO DO?
WHATEVER WORK A CHANDALA DOES!


DO I HAVE TO LIVE IN THAT HUT?


YES. YOUR DUTY IS TO WAIT ON CREMATORS AND DEMAND THE CLOTH, RICE AND MONEY. A SIXTH PART GOES TO THE KING, THREE TO ME AND THE REST WILL BE YOURS!



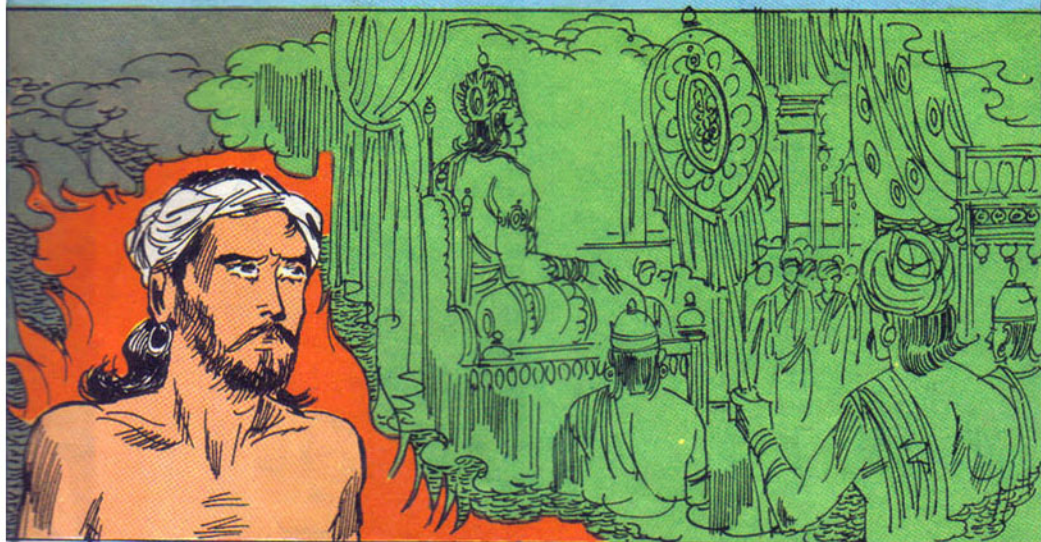
HARISCHANDRA'S DAYS PASSED COLLECTING MONEY FROM THE CREMATORS AND WATCHING THE FLAMES.



THE SIGHT OF THE PLACE AND THE FLAMES SOON MADE HIS FACE CHANGE. HIS SKIN HAD SHRIVELLED. FEW COULD RECOGNISE HIM.

HE FELT SAD WHEN HE REMEMBERED HIS WIFE AND SON.

THE DAYS PASSED. THE KING WENT ON DOING HIS WORK. THE FIRE BURNT IN THE CREMATION GROUND. THE HEAT AND SMOKE WOULD MIST HARISCHANDRA'S EYES AND HE DREAMT OF HIS LOST KINGDOM.



HE DREAMT OF THE LITTLE PRINCE ASLEEP ON HIS ROYAL BED. IT ALL SEEMED SO FAR AWAY.



MEANWHILE, THE QUEEN HAD TO WORK DAY AND NIGHT IN THE BRAHMAN'S HOUSEHOLD.



GO TO THE GARDEN! YOU CAN PLAY THERE!

ALL RIGHT, MOTHER!

WHEN THE QUEEN CAME TO HER ROOM AFTER THE DAY'S WORK, SHE FOUND THE BED EMPTY. ROHITASWA WAS NOT THERE.

WHERE IS HE? WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO HIM?

HOLDING A LAMP IN HER HAND, SAIVYA WENT FROM ROOM TO ROOM LOOKING FOR HER SON. THEN SHE REMEMBERED THE GARDEN.

POOR ROHITASWA! HE IS SLEEPING UNDER THE TREE!

HE IS COLD! WHAT ARE THESE MARKS? OH, MY SON! A SERPENT HAS BITTEN HIM!

HER EYES FILLED WITH TEARS, THE QUEEN CARRIED THE DEAD CHILD BACK TO THE HOUSE AND AWOKE THE BRAHMAN.

MY SON IS DEAD. PLEASE GIVE ME SOME MONEY FOR HIS FUNERAL!

MONEY? ISN'T IT ENOUGH THAT WE FEED YOU?











HE IS INDEED A ROYAL CHILD! HIS FATHER WAS HARISCHANDRA!

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

MY SON! MY SON!

THE WOMAN WAS STARTLED WITH THE CRY. THE VOICE SEEMED FAMILIAR. SHE PEERED CLOSE AT THE BEARDED, SHRIVELLED FACE.

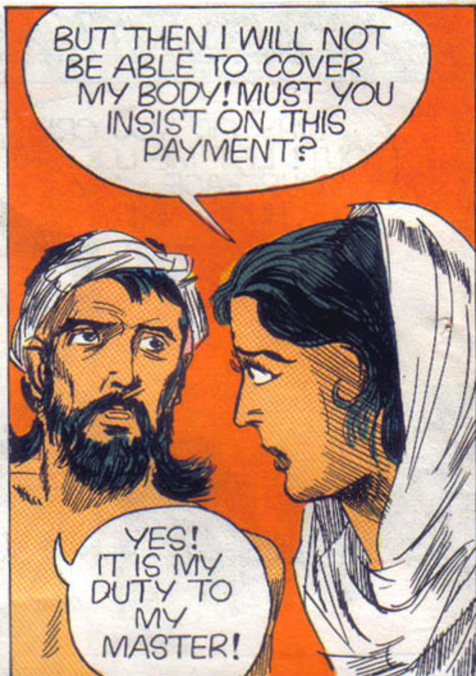
WHY DID YOU CRY OUT! LET ME LOOK AT YOUR FACE... MY HUSBAND!

YES! I'M THAT WRETCHED MAN! BUT YOU WILL HAVE TO BRING THE CLOTH AND RICE!

MY HUSBAND WHO WAS A KING IS NOW A CHANDALA? YOU ARE ASKING THE PAYMENT FOR YOUR SON'S FUNERAL?

I HAVE NO CHOICE! I CANNOT DEPRIVE MY MASTER OF HIS DUES!


BUT HOW CAN I PAY YOU?
GIVE ME HALF OF YOUR UPPER GARMENT!


BUT THEN I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO COVER MY BODY! MUST YOU INSIST ON THIS PAYMENT?
YES! IT IS MY DUTY TO MY MASTER!


THEN A STRANGE THING HAPPENED. A HAND STOPPED HIM FROM TAKING THE CLOTH.
HARISCHANDRA!


STARTLED, HARISCHANDRA TURNED ROUND. IT WAS THE CHANDALA.
HARISCHANDRA! YOUR TEST IS OVER!
WHAT TEST?

BEFORE THE CHANDALA COULD REPLY, HARISCHANDRA SAW A MAGNIFICENT SIGHT. THE DEVAS (HEAVENLY BEINGS) HAD COME DOWN TO SEE HIM.





THEN INDRA, THE KING OF THE DEVAS, CAME FORWARD.





INDRA SMILED.

SEEING INDRA'S SMILE, THE PUZZLED KING TURNED HIS EYES TO WHERE HIS SON'S BODY LAY. HE SAW A STRANGE SIGHT. ROHITASWA WAS STANDING THERE SMILING.

THEN SOMEONE CALLED HIM SOFTLY.






NO HARISCHANDRA! YOU ARE A FREE MAN! THE CHANDALA WAS YAMA, THE GOD OF VIRTUE, HIMSELF.


YOU HAVE PROVED YOUR VIRTUE! YOU HAVE EARNED YOUR PLACE IN HEAVEN!
I CANNOT GO TO HEAVEN WITHOUT MY SUBJECTS!


YOUR SUBJECTS WILL GET WHAT THEY DESERVE!
IF SO, THEN LET ME SHARE MY BLESSINGS WITH THEM ON THE EARTH!


YOU ARE TRULY A GREAT KING! YOUR REQUEST WILL BE GRANTED!

WORD HAD REACHED THE KINGDOM THAT THE KING WAS COMING BACK. PEOPLE CAME OUT OF THEIR HOUSES TO WELCOME THEIR KING.



THE STREETS WERE LINED BY PEOPLE. MANY WERE CRYING WITH JOY. THE KING WHOM THEY LOVED SO MUCH WAS COMING BACK.

LOOK! THE YOUNG PRINCE IS RIDING A HORSE!

LONG LIVE KING HARISCHANDRA!

Daddy! Read me a Story.



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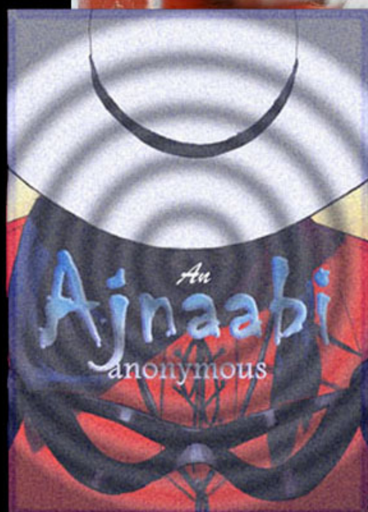
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